

Focus areas

Early in the Eastern
Cambridge Planning
Study, four focus areas

were identified for detailed study based on the likelihood of change. These include North Point and the Volpe Center area, the parts of the study area with the greatest remaining development potential; the Transition Areas between the residential neighborhoods and the commercial development in Kendall Square; and the Residential Neighborhoods. Existing conditions, development opportunities, and challenges for each of these focus areas are summarized below.

NORTH POINT

As described earlier, North Point is a 56-acre area on the northern edge of the city, characterized by industrial uses and rail yards. Recent development in North Point consists of the

Vision and Goals

high-rise residential Museum Towers and the EF Centre office building. The pattern of development bears little relationship to the traditional, small-scale block pattern of East Cambridge. The construction of the Museum Towers complex in 1998 on a portion of the site reflects an often-used model for redeveloping former industrial areas, in which large-scale buildings seek to create their own privatized environment in the absence of a surrounding context to which the new uses might relate. North Point is one of the last undeveloped areas of its size remaining in Cambridge. Most of the area is owned by two entities, Guilford Transportation Industries and the Cambridge Companies. The rest, located east of the Gilmore Bridge, is owned by MWRA, MDC, and other state agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Parks
- Housing
- Streets
- Retail & Restaurants
- Mixed Commercial & Residential
- Improve Pedestrian Connections
- Vehicle Access to North Point
- Future Bicycle/Multi-Use Path
- Pedestrian/Cycle Connections
- New Pedstrian Crosswalks
- Future Traffic Pattern

EXISTING

- Existing DOT Building
- Existing Residential Neighborhoods
- Existing Open Space
- Existing Pathway
- Existing Traffic Pattern



Composite Urban Design Goals

Currently, the area contains three zoning districts: North Point Residence, Office & Business, which makes up the bulk of the area; Special Business, Office & Industrial 1 along Monsignor O'Brien Highway; and Industry A in the northern portion abutting Charlestown.

The northern edge of the site, largely occupied by rail yards, abuts Somerville. To the south, Monsignor O'Brien Highway forms a barrier that currently cuts this area off from nearby East Cambridge. Within the district, the Gilmore Bridge creates another barrier. While accessibility presents an obstacle to the development of this site, North Point also presents many opportunities. As one of the largest developable areas remaining in the City, North Point offers the potential for creation of a new residential neighborhood, providing housing opportunities for a variety of residents. To the east, the Charles

River waterfront is being rediscovered and refurbished with the development of a 14-acre park by the Metropolitan District Commission. The park offers the potential to connect Cambridge to Charlestown and Boston. Significant opportunities exist to connect this area to East Cambridge, particularly in conjunction with the relocation of the Lechmere T Station and the development of new pedestrian crossings at the intersections of East Street, First Street, and Water Street with Monsignor O'Brien Highway. As industrial uses are replaced by walkable residential neighborhoods, connections to the Bunker Hill Community College stop on the Orange Line and to the commuter rail at North Station become more important. Since there is presently so little developed land in this area, there is also an opportunity to create a significant amount of public open space for Eastern Cambridge.

VOLPE CENTER AREA

The area surrounding Kendall Square developed much later than the residential neighborhoods of Eastern Cambridge. The industrial nature of early uses in the area is still visible in its large-scale block pattern and warehouse-like buildings, many of which have been replaced with taller office buildings in the past thirty years. The influence of urban renewal is evident in the large-scale block pattern and the design of some of the office buildings in this area.

In the heart of this district is the Volpe Center, one of the U.S. Department of Transportation's major research facilities. It is a 19-acre block consisting primarily of the Volpe office buildings and associated surface parking lots, as well as a couple of defunct industrial buildings. To the west and south of the Volpe Center block is the MXD urban renewal district, now mostly made up of R&D facilities. The Volpe Center is bordered on the north by Binney Street, on the south by Broadway, and on the east by Third Street and the site of the recently-permitted Cambridge Research Park. The bulk of the Volpe Center area is owned by the US General Services Administration, the rest by N-Star.

Currently, almost no roads penetrate the Volpe Center block, though it is accessible by car from Broadway and Third Street. Pedestrian access is also limited to the periphery. The Volpe Center is only a block away from the Kendall station, with access via the public easement through the Marriott Hotel lobby.

The entire Volpe Center block is currently zoned Office 3-A, allowing residential and office use but not retail. The Citywide Rezoning Petition proposed a PUD overlay (PUD 3A), in which residential is allowed; office/R&D is allowed up to a maximum of 25% of gross floor area (GFA); and a maximum of 2,500 square feet of retail is allowed per building.

Its prime location near transit, in the heart of Cambridge’s high-tech district, and across the street from the new Cambridge Research Park development put this block in a key position to affect the character of Kendall Square. With an increase in density, particularly through the development of new housing, the site could foster the 18-hour activity that residents desire in Kendall Square. The size of the block provides an opportunity to create a major new public park. There is also an opportunity to significantly improve connections between the adjacent neighborhoods and the Kendall Square transit station, as well as MIT.

TRANSITION AREAS

In the transition areas different development patterns and/or land uses abut each other. Transition Area A forms a perimeter of industrial buildings around three sides of the East Cambridge neighborhood, roughly along First, Binney, and Fulkerson streets. The area shares similar block sizes with East Cambridge, but its nineteenth century industrial buildings are of a much larger scale. Transition Area B is mostly new office development, an extension of Kendall Square’s high-tech cluster into Area IV and Wellington-Harrington. These are mostly large, odd-shaped blocks roughly corresponding to the One Kendall Square and Technology Square developments.

Currently, in Transition Area A, Binney and First streets lack street activity. Binney Street is difficult to cross. The industrial development, particularly in Transition Area A, creates an uninviting environment for people walking between the residential neighborhoods and Kendall Square. On First Street, the CambridgeSide Galleria and other large-scale developments cut the neighborhoods off from the river. The Grand Junction railroad tracks are a physical barrier between East Cambridge and Wellington-Harrington.

There are currently several zoning districts in the Transition Areas. They are: Residence C-1; Business A; Business B;

Industry A-1; Industry A-2; Industry B; Industry B-1; Special Business, Office and Industrial; and Cambridge Center Mixed-Use Development.

Transition Area A is predominantly zoned commercial or industrial. The Citywide Rezoning Petition strongly encouraged residential development, rezoning several districts to exclusively residential, and prohibiting Office/R&D, Industrial, and Retail uses in C1-A and C2-A zones. It would also have reduced the maximum height in some districts north of Binney Street.

In Transition Area B, the zoning is predominantly commercial and industrial, but the uses are mostly commercial. The Citywide Rezoning Petition would have reduced commercial FAR in the IB and IA-2 districts from 4.0 to 2.75.

There are numerous pedestrian barriers between the Transition Areas and the neighborhoods. However, there is extensive vehicular access to this area from Binney, First, Broadway, and Hampshire streets. Retail development along First Street faces strong competition from the Galleria Mall. Other challenges in the area include noise from R&D buildings disturbing residents, real estate pressure as new commercial development replaces smaller residential uses, and limited open space.

Yet there are considerable opportunities in these areas, as they are undergoing significant change. Both areas are close to mass transit at Kendall Square and Lechmere, and potentially the Urban Ring. One Kendall Square in Transition Area B is a thriving retail, restaurant, and entertainment destination. Pedestrian improvements in this area and well-designed new development could significantly enhance the connections between East Cambridge and Wellington – Harrington, as well as connecting the neighborhoods to the Sixth Street pedestrian walkway and improving access to Kendall Square. Many of the buildings in Transition Area A have the potential for conversions to housing, creating potential for mixed-use streets.

NEIGHBORHOODS

At the heart of Eastern Cambridge are its residential neighborhoods: Area IV, Wellington-Harrington, and East Cambridge. While there has been some large-scale development including schools, parks, and public housing, for the most part the traditional sense of human scale, variety, and pedestrian-friendly streets remains as a legacy of historical development pattern. The buildings in these neighborhoods typically line the streets, creating a lively and diverse street edge. Cambridge Street, lined with shops and other active pedestrian uses, combines these design characteristics with retail and mixed uses to function as a neighborhood main street and focus for community life.

Vehicular traffic in the neighborhoods is primarily handled by major roads such as Binney Street, Hampshire Street, Broadway, Cambridge Street, First Street, Cardinal Medeiros Avenue, and Monsignor O’Brien Highway. Traffic volumes on Third Street and Fulkerson Street are higher than expected for neighborhood streets because they provide a north-south connection between Kendall Square and Monsignor O’Brien Highway.

All of the neighborhoods are within a 15-minute walk of Lechmere, Kendall Square, or Central Square T stations. However, transit access is weaker within Area IV and Wellington-Harrington. Pedestrian access within the neighborhoods is good, but barriers such as the railroad tracks, Binney Street, and Monsignor O’Brien Highway reduce access between neighborhoods and to areas outside the neighborhoods.

The land use in these areas is predominantly residential, interspersed with neighborhood retail, small businesses, and neighborhood parks. Existing zoning, however, covers a wide range of uses, many of which are evident at the edges of the

neighborhoods around the districts identified as Transition Areas. Zoning districts in the Neighborhoods include: Residence C-1 and C-3; Business A and C; Industry A, A-1, B, and B-1; Cambridge Center Mixed Use Development; Office 3-A; Open Space; and Special Business, Office & Industrial 1. The neighborhoods are dense residential areas with few available lots for new development. Infill development on individual parcels may occur, as well as redevelopment of existing buildings. Protecting and preserving the character of the neighborhoods has been a consistent goal of the Committee and has informed the thinking of both the zoning and non-zoning recommendations in this report.

VISION STATEMENT

Eastern Cambridge is a remarkably diverse community of historic neighborhoods, state-of-the-art research facilities, a world-renowned university, a vibrant traditional main street, arts cinemas, neighborhood parks and Charles River frontage—all within a short walk of each other. The resulting mix, which interweaves housing with research, single family houses with office towers, historic with cutting edge architecture, walking and bicycles with heavy vehicular traffic, and other contrasts of urban life, provides the basis for a uniquely vital community—a quality often sought but rarely achieved in other urban communities. Yet this mix is also the source of tensions and conflicts. The core mission of this study is to preserve and enhance the benefits of Eastern Cambridge’s diversity, while managing and diminishing the accompanying negative impacts. This mission translates into broad goals that govern planning for future change in every part of Eastern Cambridge:

- Promote land use patterns that improve quality of life in residential neighborhoods and foster a vital public realm in mixed-use districts.
- Expand housing opportunities for a wide range of residents, across the community.
- Support economic development policies that address the needs of small and start-up businesses and people in need of jobs and public services.
- Shift transportation patterns toward more walking, transit use, and bicycle use, reducing reliance on automobiles.
- Meet the open space needs of current and future residents.
- Pursue urban design policies that enhance the character of residential neighborhoods, support creation of more lively pedestrian-friendly areas in mixed-use districts, and result in more attractive and convenient pedestrian connections between every part of Eastern Cambridge.

Goals

Building on the vision outlined above, a series of more specific goals were developed that address land use, housing, economic development, transportation, open space, and urban design. These objectives are summarized below.

A set of more detailed goals—reflecting the vision statement—addresses land use, housing, economic development, transportation, open space, and urban design.

A. URBAN DESIGN

- Design streetscapes and public spaces to encourage walking and cycling, and to create a welcoming pedestrian environment through the provision of street trees, seating, and lighting, and other amenities.
- Create better transitions in massing and scale from higher density mixed-use districts to residential neighborhoods.
- Preserve the scale and character of residential neighborhoods.



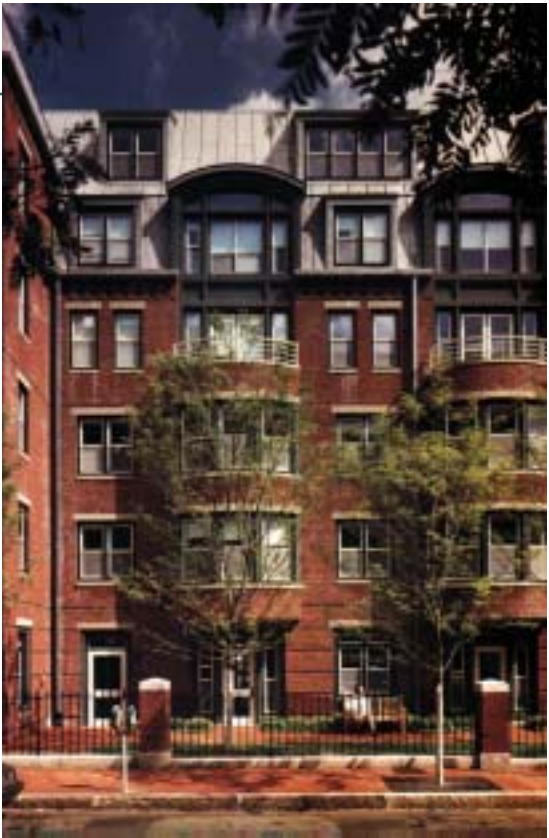
- Extend the historic scale and pattern of existing blocks into new mixed-use districts.
- Locate new buildings to provide a consistent edge along public streets, and avoid blank walls or parking facilities facing public streets.
- Locate uses such as loading docks to minimize visual impact and impact on pedestrian movement.

B. OPEN SPACE

- Enhance and expand the area's open space resources to serve current and future residents.
- Create new neighborhood parks, playgrounds and recreational facilities that serve a wide range of users.



- Design new open spaces to be convenient and welcoming to residents.
- Create a network of pedestrian and bicycle-friendly connections to the Charles River.





C. LAND USE AND DENSITY

- Ensure that the uses, scale, and density of new development are compatible with respect to the character of streets, parks and public spaces, and the existing residential neighborhoods.
- In mixed-use districts (North Point and Kendall Square), emphasize housing together with a mix of other uses such as office, R&D, and retail to create lively streets, promote walk-to-work opportunities, and limit the increase in traffic.
- Focus street-fronting retail and related pedestrian-friendly uses along streets that offer opportunities to support active commercial districts.



density commercial and housing uses within a short walking distance of public transit stations.

- Coordinate future development with the provision of new transportation access



D. HOUSING

- Encourage the development of new housing throughout Eastern Cambridge.
- Create a variety of affordable, moderate, and market-rate housing opportunities that serve a diverse population.
- Provide a mix of ownership and rental housing at all income levels.
- Encourage the creation of live/work and artists' housing.





E. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Promote the creation of a wide range of jobs that match the community's skills, education and interests.
- Strengthen existing neighborhood retail, especially along Cambridge Street, and encourage a limited amount of new retail to serve those who live and work in the area.
- Promote opportunities for start-up and incubator businesses.
- Maintain the city's long-term tax base and ability to fund a relatively high level of public services.



F. TRANSPORTATION

- Protect residential neighborhoods from the impacts of traffic associated with commercial development.
- Promote a walkable community in which residential neighborhoods and mixed-use districts are woven together with a comprehensive system of pedestrian-friendly streets and public spaces.
- Reduce reliance on the automobile by making transit, walking, and bicycling more attractive and convenient and by minimizing new parking.
- Provide a continuous system of bicycle routes, supported by lock-up racks and other facilities.
- Expand transit services by supporting the implementation of the Urban Ring, extension of the Green Line to Somerville, and enhanced bus and local shuttle services.
- Ensure that future development accommodates the Urban Ring.

